



Date: July 26, 2015

Title: "They Have the Scripture"

Scripture: Luke 16: 19-31

Summary: This is a reminder of the importance of scripture for shaping a life of Christian faith.

Luke 16: 19-31 is a parable—not as well-known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son. Two parables, actually, a BOGO! Two subjects addressed in one short story: the first from the beginning to verse 26; the second from verse 27 to the end. I recommend you read along—page 954 in the red Bible in your pew.

The Pharisees were all over Jesus' back. Jesus didn't agree with the way the Pharisees interpreted scripture regarding money. They believed that wealth was clear evidence of God's approval and poverty indicated God's displeasure and discipline. Jesus turned that upside, praising the widow who contributed small change to the offering—all she had, and teaching "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God."

So Jesus told them a story, a single story, with Parts One and Two. Part One is all about money: a wealthy man and his self-centered life-style, a poor man with nothing but problems. Then it becomes a pearly-gates story. "Donald Trump, Kim Kardashian, and Hillary Clinton all died and met St. Peter at the pearly gates..." It doesn't teach about heaven so much as teach about truth in this life.

Here's how to interpret that part of the story: anyone who has more money than us is like the rich man; we and anybody who makes less than we do play the part of Lazarus. Bad guys, beware! Especially our overpaid boss, right? (Sorry, not *my* boss. We're good, right, Lord? I'm just kidding with them.)

The second part of the story takes it to a deeper level. In torment, realizing the life he had missed while he was alive, the rich man pleads with Abraham to send back Lazarus to warn his brothers. "They're making the same mistake I made; please help

them see the truth and change their ways!" Lazarus, returning to earth, will make that happen. Lazarus will be the "secret sauce" of spiritual conversion and renewal.

Part Two of Jesus story, then, raises the question: What does it take to generate faith in a human life?

Abraham replies to the rich man, "They have the Scriptures."

"I know they have the Bible, but send back Lazarus and they'll repent."

Abraham says it again, "If the scripture doesn't do it for them, nothing more is going to work, I guarantee you."

What about it? Do you believe the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, Part Two? If you were sent to colonize that new planet that was discovered this week, and wanted to both keep your own faith alive as well as establish the Christian faith among others there, what would you take? I'd choose a cross, because how Jesus lived and died and was raised from the dead is so very central. I'd take a communion plate and cup, because that sacrament connects us so closely to Christ and to each other. And I'd take the Bible, of course, along with a complete copy of all the sermons preached by Dr. Dave Fry, in hardbound and electronic form!

This story says that the Bible is all you'd need. Which is a difficult thing to swallow. I mean, you've tried reading the Bible. So much of it is tedious and irrelevant, like the exact dimensions of the tabernacle and endless lists of "begats." And some of it offends our sense of right and wrong, such as the patriarchs of faith practicing polygamy and the kings of Israel making slaves of their enemies, (the ones they didn't slaughter, that is.)

Moreover, we have misused the Bible so often. After the Great Depression, the Department of Agriculture sent agents to teach farmers how to succeed in the field of agriculture. "Get your volume up, then lower your prices. Drive the little guy out of business and purchase that land at bargain prices."

In the back of the room, a farmer raised his hand. "But my son is just starting out with a small parcel of land I gave him. Are you saying we should try to drive him into bankruptcy?"

"Sir," replied the agent, "I'm just following the teaching of the Bible: 'To him that has, more will be given, but to him who has not, even that will be taken away. Matthew 25, v. 29)'"

“They’ve misread and ignored the scriptures, they need someone to return from the grave,” said the rich man. It takes something extra, something spectacular, if you want to appeal to young people in these modern times. Churches buy into that, and later turn out to look pretty silly. When I was growing up, I remember “Weight Lifters for God”, who would do amazing snatch and life performances and then preach that the burdens on sin are lifted away. The Smallest Christian in the World once came to our town, a two-year-old who could recite the Ten Commandments, John 3:16, and give his personal testimony. “Sky Divers for Jesus” landed in the football stadium to proclaim so would the Lord return! Are you ready?”

Jesus’ parable, however, insists this book is where we start, where we sustain our faith, where we center our life—in the scriptures. Jesus didn’t simply teach that; he demonstrated it. Countless times the gospels say he did something “according to scripture.” He resisted temptation by quoting scripture. When he prayed, he prayed scripture, even in his hardest moment. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is the first verse of Psalm 22. Jesus centered, sustained, and guided his life in scripture.

Not because the Bible tells us what we have to believe or what we can and cannot do. It is a book about life the way it really is. We need that, because life out there is so often an illusion, made of smoke and mirrors, enticing us to pursue counterfeit imitations, to build on sand, only to find ourselves thirsty and tormented. The Bible is a book about life the way it really is, and us the way we really are.

It is also a book about God, how God has acted from the moment of creation through the slow dawning of faith, about our rebellion, and finally, about how God has acted in love through Jesus Christ.

There is yet another reason for the Bible’s power. A girl once read a novel that deeply affected her. Several years after, she met the author of that novel. A little more than a year later, that author told her he was in love with her and asked her to marry him. Then she re-read the novel.

The author of the Bible is in love with you, has asked you to be his, to belong to him. The author of the Bible has made commitments to you about your life together. The Bible is not just your story; it is your love story.

Karl Barth said that reading the Bible is like looking out the window and seeing people outside shading their eyes and looking into the sky. They see something hidden by the roof to those of us inside. They’re pointing up. They’re very excited. Something

is happening or about to happen. Whatever it is, it is intense, absorbing, thrilling. To read the Bible is to read the expression on their faces; to listen to the Bible is to listen to their words.

The apostle Paul is one of those people. His hand is shaking from the cold of a prison cell, but his heart is solid as a rock in his commitment to Jesus Christ.

Timothy, young, inexperienced, ready to do anything for that old man who has become his friend as well as his teacher, and already wise in the ways of Jesus— Timothy is one of those people pointing to what he sees.

All of them have seen something. They have seen the very mystery of life. We can see their faces, hear their words, perhaps describe their lives.

In Jesus' parable, Father Abraham teeters forward and speaks his lines: "They have the scriptures; that's plenty." Without the Bible, we don't have a faith.

Is he correct? What do you think?

This sermon is based on (some of it copied from) an address by Fred Craddock given in 1990. I don't recall the title and have it only in cassette form which I can no longer access. Still, Dr. Craddock deserves to be acknowledged for anything worthy in this sermon.